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978-1-108-06420-0 - Memoirs of the Late Rev. John Wesley: With a Review of his Life and Writings, and a History of Methodism, from its Commencement in 1729, to the Present Time: Volume 3

John Hampson

Excerpt

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M E M O I R S

OF THE

REV. JOHN WESLEY, A. M.

C H A P. I.

PROGRESS OF METHODISM IN AMERICA
CONTINUED.

ON the arrival of Dr Coke in America, in 1784, he found the societies in a flourishing state, and considerably increased in number. One of his first efforts abroad, was in favour of the slaves; and it was determined in conference to endeavour the final abolition

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of their captivity. The cause was certainly a good one ; for it was the cause of justice and humanity. But it was a delicate subject ; and to manage it with effect, required not only a degree of zeal, but a large proportion of dexterity and judgment : which indeed must always be the case, where interest is concerned.

It is true, nothing can compensate the loss of liberty ; nor is any consideration of expediency or public utility competent to sanctify the violation of justice and the rights of men. The only palliation of slavery (for its vindication were impossible) must be found in the kind, generous behaviour of their masters. It is well known, that the condition of slaves is not uniformly the same. It varies according to the temper of the owner, and may be compared to that of subjects in an absolute government ; very tolerable,

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where the sovereign is a man of wisdom and benevolence ; but if a tyrant, miserable in the extreme. The situation of slaves under some masters is, in point of comfort, superior to that of the labouring poor in Britain : and as this was the case with many of those, among whom the preachers laboured in America, we cannot entirely approve the expressions of their zeal, which, in some instances, almost amounted to intolerance. One of their leaders, when preaching the funeral sermon of a gentleman and a brother, observes, that he “ did not say any good of him,” because in this business he had been a thorn in his side ; not considering, that it is possible his character might have been truly excellent, notwithstanding this difference of judgment. Public persons have often occasion to be reminded of the advice of Hamlet to the play

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ers*; and to be admonished that, constituted as human nature is, gentleness and courtesy will do infinitely more toward the accomplishment of a favourite project, than any of those clumsy, fulminating measures, which are beneath a man of ability and discernment, and which ignorance and rashness alone are capable of adopting. We have no doubt, that zeal in a good cause, and under proper direction, is virtue; but we know too, that there are cases, in which it is a curse, as well to its possessor, as to those who suffer from its unseasonable explosions. Much zeal and little discernment, are the genuine characteristics of a Marplot.

The exertions of Dr Coke and his brethren, in the cause of liberty, were sometimes attended with disagreeable ef-

“ Use all gently.”

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fects. Some offence was the natural consequence of a tender point, not handled in the most delicate manner: and more than once his person was in danger. Several riots were excited: and one lady offered “the rioters fifty pounds, if they would give that little Doctor one hundred lashes.” But the Doctor was in luck. Some of his friends were of the church militant: and a strapping colonel interposing, the vapulation did not take place. Above all, several were induced to comply with his exhortations, and a few slaves were emancipated.

The employment of the preachers on the continent was laborious; though perhaps it had its agreements: for it has been observed, that few, who have gone over, have thought proper to return. In the course of the day, they frequently rode twenty or thirty miles through the

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wilderness, preaching twice or thrice, and sometimes to considerable congregations. Their excursions, through immense forests, abounding in trees of all sorts and sizes, were often highly romantic. Innumerable rivers and falls of water; vistas opening to the view, in contrast with the uncultivated wild; deer now shooting across the road, and now scouring through the woods; while the eye was frequently relieved by the appearance of orchards and plantations, and the houses of gentlemen and farmers peeping through the trees, formed a scenery so various and picturesque, as to produce a variety of reflection, and present, we will not say, to a philosophic eye, but to the mind of every reasonable creature, the most sublime and agreeable images.

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Their worship partook of the general simplicity. It was frequently conducted in the open air. The woods resounded to the voice of the preacher, or to the singing of his numerous congregations; while their horses, fastened to the trees, formed a singular addition to the solemnity. It was indeed a striking picture, and might naturally impress the mind with a retrospect of the antediluvian days, when the hills and vallies re-echoed the patriarchal devotions, and a Sheth or an Enoch, in the shadow of a projecting rock, or beneath the foliage of some venerable oak, delivered his primeval lectures, and was a “preacher of righteousness” to the people.

Among other agreements, may be reckoned the American hospitality, the consciousness of being well employed, and the satisfaction resulting from considerations

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of public utility. As many of the preachers were men of fervent piety, this reflection would have it's full weight ; and the instruction of the ignorant, and the reformation of the profligate, would be considered as the best recompence of their labours. Spreading themselves through the continent, they took in Nova Scotia, Georgia, with the principal places in both the Carolinas, Virginia, Maryland, Delaware, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and New York, and numbering upwards of forty-three thousand members of society, exclusive of about eighty itinerants, and a considerable number of local preachers, who took no circuits, but assisted occasionally, in the neighbourhood of their respective residence.

The colonists, in the infancy of methodism, conducted themselves with more propriety than our own countrymen.

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There was little or no persecution, nor any thing like a riot, except in one or two instances, which have been mentioned, as the consequence of the animadversions on slavery; and even, these were productive of no mischief. Not a creature was materially injured; no bones were broken, nor any lives lost; which was not the case in this country. Here many thousands of innocent people were subject to the grossest indignities, and several were eventually sacrificed to the fury of their persecutors.

While we commend the Americans for their behaviour, in opposition to the brutality of the English mobs, it may be proper to enquire into the sources of this distinction. Something of this may have arisen from similarity of sentiment. The Americans, from the first beginnings of colonization, had been accustomed to the

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doctrines of the old puritans and non-conformists, which, in many respects, have a near affinity to the methodistic tenets. The origin of methodism in America was seldom, if ever attended, either under the discourses of Mr Whitefield, or Mr Wesley's preachers, with the ridiculous effects with which it was accompanied in these kingdoms. Most of the preachers, who went over to the continent, having laboured for some years in Europe, previous to their crossing the water, had exhausted their wild-fire: so that their discourses were more scriptural and rational than those of the primitive methodists. Another reason may be found in the education of the Americans. As a people, they are better cultivated than the body of the English. They are chiefly composed of merchants and a respectable yeomanry: and